

Informal Conjugal Unions and Schooling in Brazil: A Comparison between 1980 and 2010

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Introduction

Brazil, similarly to most other countries in Latin America, has seen a significant increase in informal unions¹ in the last few decades, accompanied by a great number of sociocultural changes, including an expressive educational expansion.

In the past, informal unions were observed almost exclusively between people in the lowest income and educational attainment, as they were seen as a cheaper alternative to formal unions, with the added benefit of being easier to dissolve (Castro-Martin, 2002). However, as informal unions became more prevalent, they also started to become more common in all demographic and socioeconomic groups, which suggests the coexistence of different types of informal unions in Brazil (Esteve et al, 2012; Covre-Sussai et al, 2015).

The growth of consensual unions amongst the highest educated women could suggest a diffusion of values connected the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe e Van de Kaa, 1986). According to this theory, the highly educated people would chose informal unions as a way for them to exercise their individual autonomy, opposing the control of the church and government, and to break away from the antiquated cultural norms tied to formal marriages (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

However, at the same time, the educational expansion observed in Brazil in the last few decades meant that more people from various different backgrounds were enrolling and completing higher levels of education. This led to a higher heterogeneity of educational groups, meaning that not necessarily all highly educated women who chose informal unions are doing so for the same reasons, including those specified by the STD.

With that in mind, this article has two main objectives. The first is to look at the association between type of union (formal or informal) and schooling in Brazil. This analysis will be done for women between 25 and 29 years old who are in a union, for the years of 1980 and 2010. The second objective is to investigate if there are demographical and socioeconomic differentials by type of union between women with a high educational attainment. This analysis will be done for women between 25 and 29 years old, with at least some tertiary education, who are in a union, for the years of 1980 and 2010.

The results allow for a better understanding of the relationship between schooling and type of union, as well as to how the meaning of informal unions has changed in Brazil in these 30 years.

Methods

This article uses data from the Brazilian censuses of 1980 and 2010, taken from IPUMS-International. The comparison between these two censuses allows us to see how the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of women in a union have changed over the years in Brazil. The analysis started with the 1980s census because informal unions in Brazil grew mostly after the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period also marked by important legal changes in regards to formal and informal unions (Castro-Martin, 2002; Marcondes, 2011; Esteve et al., 2012).

¹ Meaning those without a written contract or certificate. In this paper, informal unions will be used as a synonym to cohabitation and consensual unions.

The analysis was done for women 25 to 29 years old who are in a union, formal or informal. They represent around 72% of the women of that age group in 1980 and 60% in 2010. This age group was chosen because most of younger women (aged 15 to 24) still haven't been in a union in Brazil, while the older women (aged 30 and over) present a very high proportion who are already in a second union or even separated, divorced or widowed. In addition, women between 25 and 29 have all mostly finished their educational trajectory. Finally, using this age group for analysis allows for a better comparison with other similar studies.

The statistical method used was a logistic regression. Firstly, we estimated the chance of being in a formal or informal union. The dependent variable is "being in a formal union" (reference category) versus "being in an informal union". This information comes from the census question that asks to everyone one who is 10 years or older if they live with a spouse and what is the nature of this relationship: civil and religious marriage, only civil marriage, only religious marriage and "other" for the 1980 census and "informal union" for the 2010 census.

A second logistic regression was done to calculate the chance of "being in a formal union" versus "being in an informal union", for women between 25 and 29 years old who were in a union and had at least some tertiary education (university), only for the census of 2010.

The independent variables used for both regressions were age, educational attainment, race/color, religion, residing in urban/rural area, country's macro-region of residence and socioeconomic class. This last variable takes into account education attainment of the household head, access to public services (such as water and electricity) and ownership of certain basic items and household appliances.

This study presents a few methodological limitations due to the nature of the available data. For example, the use of census data does not allow us to infer the causality of events or to know the marital history of the women. Because of this, we cannot know if a woman who is currently in a formal union was already in an informal union in the past. There is also the limitation regarding the use of variables such as schooling and class, as those can change throughout the life cycle. However, even with those limitations, the results of this article are still of great relevance to demonstrate how the socioeconomic and demographical profile of the women in formal and informal union has changed in Brazil in the last decades.

Results

The descriptive analysis shows that the percentage of women between 25 and 29 years old in an informal union in Brazil goes from 13% in 1980 to 51% in 2010. This growth is also accompanied by an educational expansion: in 1980, less than 6% of the sample had started university; in 2010, this percentage grows to 18%. Despite the growth of consensual unions, the data shows that 68% of the women with at least some tertiary education were still in formal unions in 2010. The same can be said about women from the higher socioeconomic classes (classes A and B), for which 70% and 52%, respectively, were in formal unions in 2010.

In 2010, white women were still mostly in formal unions (56%) and black women mostly in informal unions (60%). As for religion, the evangelical women are still the group with the highest percentage of women in formal unions. However, this percentage decreased from 92.5% in 1980 to 64% in 2010.

The results of the logistic regression support the previous findings in the literature that, for both in 1980 and 2010, the higher the educational attainment, the lower the chance of a women in a union between 25 and 29 years old to prefer a formal union over an informal one. Moreover, the educational differentials actually increased over time. In 1980, the chance of being in a formal union was 2.71 times larger for women with at least some tertiary education in comparison to women with incomplete primary education. In 2010, this odds ration grows to 3.29. A similar pattern can be seen for class differentials: for both censuses, women of a

lower socioeconomic class have a smaller chance of being in a formal union if compared to women of the highest social class and the differentials increased between 1980 and 2010.

Moreover, white women have a higher chance for being in a formal union than black and mixed race (*pardas*) women in both 1980 and 2010. Evangelical women also have a higher chance of being in a formal union than Catholics and this differential increased over the years. Living in an urban environment also leads to higher odds ratio of being in a formal union than living in a rural environment.

As for the regression considering only 25 to 29 year old women in a union with at least some tertiary education, the results show that those who concluded tertiary education have a higher chance of being in a formal union (odds ratio of 1.55) in comparison to those who haven't concluded it (yet). In addition, the women from socioeconomic classes B, C and D/F have a smaller chance of being in a formal union than in an informal union in comparison to women in class A.

In conclusion, the results show that even though informal unions are becoming more common between all social classes, women of higher schooling and social class still present a higher chance to choose formal over informal unions. In addition, the differentials by education actually grew between 1980 and 2010, indicating that this preference has become stronger with time.

The results confirm the theories that informal unions in Brazil are – at least to a certain segment of the population – connected to a strategy of the poorest groups as a protection against economic hardships (Castro-Martin, 2002; Fussell & Palloni, 2004; Covre-Sussai et al., 2015), as this is still the preferred type of union for women of the lower social classes.

These results partially contradict the idea that the growth of informal unions in Brazil is an indication of the STD, as they show that the majority of the informal unions in the country are of the traditional type. According to this theory, it would be expected that informal unions would become an alternative to formal marriage in the sense of being a more egalitarian partnership and disentangled from governmental control. At the same, however, the results also show that it is no longer possible to say that traditional cohabitation is the only type of informal union in the country. With the cultural and legal changes of the last few decades, informal unions have become more accepted as an alternative to formal marriages for people of all classes. Even if they are still predominantly of the traditional type, the women who choose informal unions are now part of a very heterogeneous group, indicating a diversity of motivations for choosing this type of union.

Therefore, even if they aren't the majority, there is a group of highly educated women who are choosing informal unions as an alternative to formal marriages. It is possible that they represent the pioneer group for the start of the STD in the country, as suggested by Esteve et al. (2012). However, it is also possible that these women are choosing informal unions simply because the legal changes seen since the constitution on 1988 have made formal and informal unions practically indistinguishable from each other, as suggested by Castro-Martin (2002) e Vieira (2016).

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